

NORTH CHICAGO — A plan to reopen Martin Luther King Drive across the Union Pacific railroad tracks to Naval Station Great Lakes is on again, for now.

For the past month, North Chicago city officials have mulled scrapping the project because the city doesn't have enough money to pay for it. The project is expected to cost \$5.9 million.

However, the city learned Monday that U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk, R-Highland Park, apparently is confident that the city can get a \$1.5 million federal grant for the work in 2007 and that more grants may be available in 2008.

Until now, the City Council was preparing to vote to drop the project, which is considered crucial by planners for the success of a proposed 32-acre commercial development north and east of the King Drive-Sheridan Road intersection.

Even with an additional \$1.4 million, the city will still be looking for more funds to complete the crossing project.

"Not only North Chicago must support it," said Mayor Leon Rockingham. "We need entities from Lake Forest, Lake Bluff and others to come in on this."

Meanwhile, a settlement is near with the bankrupt R. Lavin & Sons company that operated a

smelter on the 32-acre development site. The company owes \$500,851 in back property taxes and has agreed to pay the entire bill — 25 percent now and the balance within five years, said city attorney Charles Smith. The council is expected to vote on the settlement later this month.

Kirk has made a commitment to work for a \$1.5 million grant in 2007, said Rockingham, speaking Monday at a City Council meeting. "And he said he would continue (to work) to bring other funds to move the project forward," the mayor said.

"The congressman is ... definitely going after \$1.5 million in 2007," said Eric Elk, a spokesman for Kirk who attended the meeting. "And in 2008 he'd go after (more) federal dollars for these programs."

North Chicago already has spent about \$1 million, has a \$600,000 commitment from Lake County and has an additional \$1.1 million in federal funds for the project. That leaves the city short by about \$3.3 million, noted 6th Ward Ald. Larry Hightower, Finance Committee chairman.

A vote scheduled Monday to revoke authorization to proceed with the work was held over pending an expected letter from Kirk spelling out his commitment to work for the grants.

Hightower asked Elk to urge Kirk, a Navy Reserve commander, to "use his influence" with the Navy to reverse a decision to maintain Gate 4, the gate opposite King Drive, as a "service" or "business" gate instead of a "major thoroughfare" into the Navy base.

If the city does not go forward, it could face lawsuits from Hines Lumber and the Union Pacific railroad, warned city attorney Charles Smith. The two businesses have incurred expenses in anticipation of the project, he indicated. "I'm getting threats of legal action," Smith said.

Rockingham said he would "direct staff to move forward on the project," as soon as he receives a letter from Kirk confirming statements made by the congressman and Elk.